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AUTHOR Salas, Gumecindo; Carl, Bradley
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ABSTRACT

The Benito Juarez Academy is a charter school for grades 9-12 located in Saginaw, Michigan. The school was established in 1995 to meet the needs of youth who were most at risk for low academic achievement, behavioral problems, and dropping out of school. This paper describes the school's planning and development process and the attitudes of parents and students toward their former schools and the academy. Data were obtained from a survey of 50 percent of the academy's parents and from 70 percent of its students during winter 1996. Findings indicate that in general, parents and students expressed satisfaction with the academy's performance and potential. The academy is advised to avoid creating the perception of an overly large and bureaucratic structure; closely monitor attendance patterns; consider funding extracurricular activities; continue to devote attention to teachers' responsiveness to students' needs; and address the issue of career identification and training for students. Four tables and two figures are included. (LMI)

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Benito Juarez Academy

A Profile of Benito Juarez Academy

Saginaw, Michigan

Report to:
Benito Juarez Academy
Board of Directors

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Prepared by:

Gumecindo Salas, Assistant Professor
Bradley Carl, Research Assistant
Urban Affairs Programs
Michigan State University

February 13, 1997

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Background and History

The Benito Juarez Academy is a 9-12 public education institution located in Saginaw, Michigan. The school is one of a new type of educational institution known as a "charter school" which were first legislated in Minnesota in 1991 and later established in Michigan in 1994. Charter schools are one component of a larger movement toward "school choice" which has become very popular in educational policy circles in the recent past. With growing concern among the general public about the performance of publicly-funded schools, charter schools and other choice-based reforms are seen by some as a means of injecting choice, competition, and accountability into education in order to improve school performance.

As a charter school, the Benito Juarez Academy is funded through a per-pupil allotment from the State of Michigan (similar to other public school districts), but differs in that it is not able to assess local taxes of its own. Its charter refers to the operating agreement - containing specific goals and objectives which the school is designed to meet - which was established between the school's board of directors and the state-approved agency which oversees the school's operations and monitors its progress. Charters may be granted by intermediate school districts, by school districts, or by universities. In Benito Juarez Academy's case, the chartering entity is Central Michigan University, which has been the most active chartering institution within the state of Michigan (having chartered 39 of the state's 73 charter schools).

The charter application was developed by a committee made up of parents, community leaders, and educators from the Saginaw community who saw a need to provide an alternative educational process for youth whose school experience and academic success within the regular public schools in their community had been generally dismal. The charter application consisted of a legal contract and an academic contract which included a philosophy statement, a school administrative structure, and a specific curriculum plan -

all of which were drawn up based upon state charter school guidelines and on the specific needs of the proposed student population.

Submission of a proposal for charter school funding by Benito Juarez's board of directors had its beginning almost a year prior to the development and submission of the final proposal. During the fall of 1993, a community-based committee convened by the State Director of LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens), a Hispanic service organization, met to discuss a number of concerns about Hispanic youth in the Saginaw Public Schools. It was their assessment that not only were large numbers of Hispanic youth not graduating from high school, but that many students frequently found themselves in trouble for bad behavior that resulted in reprimands and school suspensions. Committee members feared that unless these youth were challenged in some fashion beyond what was being provided by the regular public school system, the Hispanic community of Saginaw would be faced with significant numbers of this generation's youth involved in legal altercations today and minimal paying jobs, prison, and welfare dependency in the future.

Based on the dismal scenario which faced Hispanic youth in the community, the committee decided to develop a proposal for an alternative school which would meet the needs of youth who were most at risk of low academic achievement, behavioral problems, and dropping out of school. Generally, two kinds of youth would be targeted for this school. One type of youth would be those who achieved academically at average or below average levels and in many cases were essentially "sitting out" the four years of high school minimally involved (at best) in the learning process.

The second type of youth targeted for enrollment at what would later become the Benito Juarez Academy would be those who might be considered "higher risk" youth than those in the first group. These youth tend to be performing poorly in school, involved in conflict with teachers, and perhaps involved in youth gangs. Despite having experienced these difficulties, this group had nonetheless expressed some interest in succeeding in school.

The decision to seek out youth from the two categories indicated above was intended to create an environment where close attention based on small class size would establish a feeling of cooperation between teachers and students that would motivate students to achieve. In addition, it was hoped that students who were poor performers but not involved in delinquent behavior might serve as role models for the more risk-prone students. Developers of the Benito Juarez alternative school proposal felt that Hispanic students who fit into both of these groups were being ignored in the regular public school system. What was needed indeed was a new and distinct school environment which would be able to address those aspects of the educational process which are essential to making these students more academically competitive and improving their interaction with the school and its staff.

With this objective in mind a proposal committee began its work in the final months of 1993 to design a proposal for submission to foundations and private corporations from the Saginaw area. During the process of developing the proposal, the committee - which was meeting on a weekly basis - was informed that the state was considering legislation for creation of a new educational process as an alternative to the existing public school system. This was the charter school system which was described in the introduction. In time the committee proceeded to seek out information on the guidelines and regulations for creation of a charter school. By the spring of 1995 the committee had completed the proposal and submitted the document for the establishment of the Benito Juarez Academy to Central Michigan University. The application was approved on April 18th, 1995 (pending approval of the articles of incorporation which were approved August 15, 1995) - approximately four months before the school year began.

For the purposes of identifying the governance board which would oversee the operations of Benito Juarez Academy, the charter planning committee solicited prospective committee members by a "word of mouth" procedure. Committee members encouraged community leaders, parents who served as education advocates in the community, and educators who had a history of working in the community to apply for

board positions. Ultimately, the process resulted in seven individuals being approved by the planning committee as the Academy's governance board.

Among the board's first concerns was securing capital resources such as a suitable building for the school. While legislation in Michigan has been generally favorable to those who want to establish charter schools, it is to some extent contradictory in that these schools are given money for educating students - but none for capital expenses such as obtaining school facilities. For some of the state's charter schools, this is a much greater obstacle than for others, as those in more affluent communities with relatively well-off students and parents have far more resources for obtaining school buildings. In other schools - such as Benito Juarez - this was a far more daunting task. For purposes of identifying a site, the planning committee solicited the assistance of a retired local architect who provided *pro bono* services. Together with the city fire marshal, they visited five sites - four of which were lacking in safety standards. The fifth site turned out to be the ground floor of the Tri-Metro SER (Service, Employment, Redevelopment) job training facility in Saginaw, which the fire marshal indicated could be used as a school site for Benito Juarez with minor modification. Approval for utilizing the facilities as a school was also granted by the Department of Labor and the Department of Public Health.

Having secured a facility in which to house the school, the new board's next task was to create a process for advertising the Academy to interested youth and parents. To accomplish this goal, local media resources were used in several ways, including a twice-monthly advertisement about the school in the local newspaper which ran for three months and numerous flyers which were distributed to churches in the area. Another method of recruitment involved simple "word of mouth" among community leaders who were asked to identify and encourage parents with youth from the groups identified to consider the Academy as a school option.

Once this process had been completed, an interim director for the school was hired to begin the process of hiring staff and creating a system for accepting applications and admitting students. The

application process began in June and closed August 30, after which time the director (with the assistance of the governance board) determined which students would be admitted. Admission criteria for the Academy were based upon guidelines outlined in the school charter which had been developed by the interim committee and adopted by the interim board and director. The advertisement process resulted in 70 applications from which 43 students representing grades 9-12 were selected for the first year of the Benito Juarez Academy. While the number of first year students attending the Academy was adequate it remains the intent of board members to expand the number in the second year of operation to include students from the middle school as well as the high school level.

Benito Juarez Academy Enrollment

Total: 43 Girls - 18 Boys - 25

Description of the Academy

Building Site

At the time at which the information was collected to complete this monograph, the Benito Juarez Academy was housed in the ground floor of the Tri-Metro SER job training building located on the southeast side of the city of Saginaw. The location is two blocks from the major street which divides the city. The section of the building which was used for the Academy was painted and furniture was secured from several sources. The school consists of three classrooms, a gymnasium, and an administrative office. As there was no cafeteria available, all students bring a brown bag lunch or go off-campus to obtain lunch. During the writing of the monograph, the board of directors began the process of searching for a new facility which would give the Academy more space to permit expansion beyond its student enrollment. Currently the Benito Juarez Academy is located on the east side of Saginaw in a former private school building.

Staffing

Staff at Benito Juarez were carefully selected to ensure that they would be comfortable and supportive of the type of students which were to be served. Selection of teachers was perhaps the most significant component of the hiring process, as teachers who expressed an interest and belief that all students could be motivated to succeed were of particular interest in this new school. Staff were provided with professional development to enhance their skills in working with this type of student population.

Office staff selected consisted of individuals who had been active in the community in seeking ways to improve the educational opportunity for youth. The criteria for the position of director for the school was foremost to possess a strong motivation and solid belief that given the appropriate opportunity and support, all students can achieve. The individual selected for the director turned out to be a former teacher from a traditional public school in the area who had a good understanding of the community and the type of youth which would be involved in the Academy. The director had been raised in the community, and by his own admission had been a non-traditional student who had been motivated to study and to graduate from high school by special teachers who saw potential in him. He expressed great expectations that he could create the same kind of relationship between the teachers and the students in the Benito Juarez Academy.

Summary of Survey Findings

A "Profile" of Students, Parents, and Staff

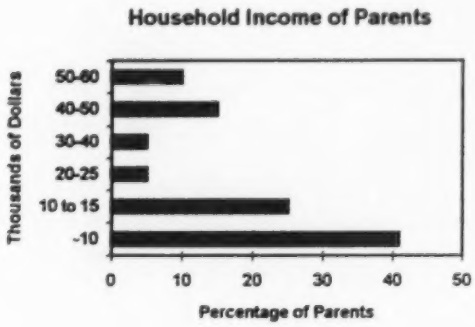
Parents

Obtaining a historical, demographic, and academic "profile" of the Academy required the collection of data through a survey instrument administered to parents and students and staff during the winter of 1996. While not all the parents and students involved in the Academy were able to be surveyed, from those who were surveyed it was possible to develop a profile of the type of parents and students

participating in the Academy. This is generally more true for students than for parents, as 70% of students were surveyed (as opposed to 50 % of parents). Nonetheless the researchers feel confident that a 50% sampling provides a strong representative profile of the characteristics of the parents.

Education, Income, and Prior School Setting

In the area of education, the survey discovered that 72% of the parents with students at Benito Juarez Academy who completed a survey questionnaire had a high school education, with 33% of these reporting having had some college education. From the tone of their responses it appears that most parents had been at least somewhat successful in their own educational process, which is perhaps one of the factors which motivated parents to transfer their youth to a school where they could be as successful. In the area of parental income levels, 65% of parents reported household incomes of less than $15,000, while 25% reported incomes of over $40,000. Parents at Benito Juarez Academy appeared to represent all income groups but were more concentrated in the lower income levels.



When considering where parents sent their children to school prior to enrolling in the Academy, the survey of parents reports that 86% of the youth attended a public school prior to transferring to the Academy. Only 10% of the students had attended a private school with no children having been transferred from a religious school - findings which perhaps somewhat surprising in that some public opinion seems to imply that charter schools are overwhelmingly attractive to parents who are interested in obtaining a private school-type education at public expense. More important however is the fact that the

data illustrates that parents regardless of income and prior education are deeply concerned about their child's education enough to consider transferring them to a new and untried educational institution.

Sources of Parental Information About the Academy and Prior School Involvement

How parents came to know about the Academy is a question which the administration of the school should be interested in for future student recruitment. Although several methods of advertising for the Academy were utilized, the survey discovered that 57% of the parents learned of the Academy from a community leader or friend, or by reading the newspaper. Twenty-nine percent of parents report "other methods" for learning of the Academy. Ultimately, it appears that word or mouth and the newspaper are the best methods for informing the community about the Academy. Future recruitment efforts may wish to continue utilizing these methods in addition to relying on students and parents already affiliated with the Academy.

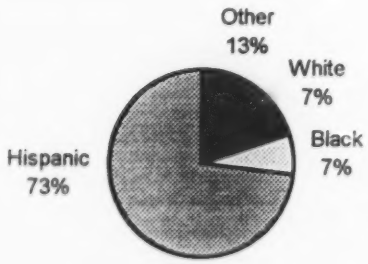
Parental involvement in school activities is known to be a critical factor in the academic success of children. At Benito Juarez, the survey found that only 56% of parents had attended an activity in their child's former school such as a meeting with a teacher, a parent-teacher conference, or a meeting with the school administration on a monthly or semesterly basis. Even more telling was the finding that 44% indicated that only on a *once-yearly* basis or *never* have they attended an activity in the school which directly involved the education of their son or daughter. Why parents so infrequently visited their child's former school is a topic for more in-depth research. One explanation offered by the researchers based on information gleaned from the surveys is that parents may well view the school as unfriendly and unwilling to respond to their concerns. This conclusion is strongly supported by the fact that 47% of parents felt that the area public schools in their area did not respond to their concerns, and that parents identified "lack of response by teachers" as the third most important reason for removing their child from his/her former

school. It is also worth noting that parents cited "better communication between school and parents" as one of the major reasons for their decision to send their youth to the Academy.

Of further interest in the area of school responsiveness was the finding that 95% of parents felt that teachers from the Academy "...have more contact with students than do teachers in their child's former school." It is logical to conclude that this sentiment is based on class size, which is significantly smaller at Benito Juarez and many other charter schools than in the Saginaw Public Schools. This is perhaps an important "lesson" to be learned from this research: that among the Academy's most significant goals should be to avoid creating an overly large and unresponsive school environment. To prevent a situation in which Academy parents avoid interacting with its teachers and administration as they did in their child's former school, staff at Benito Juarez will have to work hard at showing the parents that their concerns will be given proper attention. This suggestion can be more fully appreciated when considering that 100% of the parents indicated that they expect the Academy (both administration and teachers) to keep them informed as to how their child is doing in school.

Students

A more in-depth look at the youth who make up the Benito Juarez Academy was made possible by the fact that surveys were obtained from 30 (of the approximately 43) students who were attending the Academy at the time when the surveys were distributed. This larger sample permits a more accurate and representative "picture" of the youth at Benito Juarez, whose ages ranged from 14 to 17. As indicated in the graph to the left, the majority of students who attend Benito Juarez Academy and who responded to the survey identify themselves as being of Hispanic origin, but white and African American students are also present in the school, as well as those



Student National Origin

who indicated "other" or a combination of racial groups. Overall Benito Juarez Academy appears to have attracted students from all the predominant groups in society and does illustrate that all parents regardless of race or ethnic affiliation are fully interested in the education of their youth.

Past School Experiences of Benito Juarez Students and Perceptions of Their New School

Exploring the reasons why students were transferred from their former school to Benito Juarez was among the foremost goals of this research, and students were thus asked a series of questions along these lines. Some 60% of students indicated that they had requested that their parents send them, while 33% indicated that the parents transferred the youth without their input. The high percentage of youth which requested to be sent to the Academy is perhaps indicative that youth were interested in learning and in finding a place where they can achieve - and were not necessarily interested, as might be predicted, in simply living out their school years as low-achieving students or as "troublemakers" and delinquents. This finding may also be illustrative of a high degree of independence that this group of students has relative to other student populations.

One explanation for the high number of youth asking their parents to transfer them to the Academy might be their prior patterns of school attendance. The survey revealed that many students were not attending school on a regular basis, with 52% reporting having attended school "not very often." Low attendance patterns may demonstrate that many students did not find their former school enticing or stimulating enough to justify their regular attendance. The unfortunate pattern is that students who lose interest in school - whether for academic or other reasons - often stop attending regularly and end up dropping out. Benito Juarez Academy should pay close attention to attendance patterns as one predictor of interest and performance of its students.

Activities which students participate in within the school structure - yet outside of the classroom - can have a strong influence on their sense of loyalty to and involvement in the school. Stated in a different

manner, school activities can and do influence a student's desire to attend school and "push themselves" academically even when they might not have a history of doing so. The survey found that 64% of students at Benito Juarez had "seldom" or "never" participated in extracurricular activities such as sports and clubs while attending their former school. This information may be an explanation for why students encouraged their parents to transfer them to the Academy, as from a student's perspective, there was nothing (either academic nor extracurricular activities) which sufficiently motivated them to stay in school. Involvement in extracurricular activities has been shown to be important for all students in developing a sense of attachment to the school, and this may be particularly true for higher-risk and lower-achieving students who otherwise see little reason to continue attending school. With these considerations in mind, it might be important for the Academy to consider providing, in the future, extracurricular activities that involve students as a way to balance out their educational experience. These activities should, of course, be based upon the interests of the students, and this is certainly not to say that extracurricular activities should be pursued at the expense of academic concerns. Such activities, rather, might be seen as an effective "carrot" in motivating improved attendance and academic performance.

Expectations of Students for Graduation and School "Responsiveness"

In comparing their past (traditional public) school experience with that in their new (charter) school, students appear to have improved hopes for graduating since enrolling at Benito Juarez and felt that the Academy was doing a better job of caring for and paying attention to their needs.

Table I
Comparison in Student attitudes between schools

Activity	Benito Juarez	Former School
Had "high hopes" for graduation	77%	56%
Felt that school cares for and pays attention to students	80%	37%

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The 77% of students who expected to graduate from high school since attending the Academy represents a significant improvement over the 56% who had such expectations in their former (traditional public) schools. Whether these expectations will change again (for better or for worse) during their future enrollment at the Academy seems largely dependent upon how well the Academy interacts with and motivates students to learn in ways that their former schools were unable to do.

The extent to which Benito Juarez Academy can interact with and motivate its students will be largely dependent upon the treatment (and *perceived* treatment) of students and parents by the school teachers and staff. These factors greatly influence the degree to which a student takes his/her education seriously, attends school regularly, and makes a commitment to learning. Stated a different way, students are much more likely to perform academically if they feel that their teachers care about them and believe that they are capable of learning. Questions posed to Benito Juarez students provide interesting commentary on how well the Academy and the students' former schools were performing in this respect. Overwhelmingly (by a 43% difference), students felt that the Academy cared more about how they were doing in school than had their former school. Eighty percent of students felt that the Academy cared about their academic performance, while only 37% felt that their former school had done so. Very few students (only 3%) had feelings that the Academy was <u>not</u> sensitive to them, while in contrast, 43% felt that their former school had not demonstrated that it cared about their academic performance. A follow-up question that supported, to some extent, these findings on treatment asked students if they felt that their former school treated all students "fairly" regardless of age, race, sex, etc. Nearly three-fourths (70%) reported that they were unsure or disagreed that their former school had exhibited fair treatment, which implies that the schools were seen as not caring about their academic performance and treated students differently based on individual characteristics.

Questions about how students perceived the ability and willingness of teachers and school staff to help them learn showed a similar contrast between the Academy and the students' former schools. Only one-third of students felt that teachers in their former school had been willing to help all students learn, with fully half being unsure about this question. The role of school counselors was an interesting finding given the responsibility of these personnel in assisting students in dealing with problems, choosing a career or college, and other important decisions. The survey revealed that slightly over half (57%) of students felt that counselors in their former school had been helpful to them. This figure, which would ideally be much closer to 100%, may be of interest to those who oversee the Benito Juarez Academy, as it illustrates the importance of counselors to students such as these who have had, in many cases, family-related problems which interfere with learning and participating in school activities. If teachers are seen as being unable or unwilling to help students learn and unconcerned about their personal lives, a "void" which inhibits success in school may exist. This appears to have been a major reason for students wanting to transfer to the Benito Juarez Academy, as students listed "responsiveness of teachers to the needs of students" as the major reason why they felt their parents moved them to the Academy (see Table 4 - p. 18).

Two major observations may be made from the information above. The first is that students did not feel that their former school had cared much about them, and had in fact harbored feelings that the school was not fair in its treatment of students. Secondly, out of eleven possible causes given for students to select as to why they have attended the Academy, students selected "responsiveness of teachers to the needs of students" as their top reason. This clearly illustrates an area in which Benito Juarez will have to devote a great deal of attention in meeting the needs of its student population.

Other factors and conditions present in students' former schools which most likely contributed to transfers to the Academy appear in Table 2.

Table 2

Student Perceptions of Their Former School

Areas of school function	SA & A *	SD &D*
Did a good job preparing students for college	40%	17%
Did a good job preparing students for job opportunities	37%	30%
Class size is satisfactory	50%	30%
Schools responded well to students/parents	37%	24$
Was a safe place to learn	47%	34%

SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, SD - Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree

For example, only 37% - or slightly more than one-third - of students felt that their former school had done a good job in preparing them for the world of work. This low positive response by students resembles the 26% of parents who also expressed doubts about the ability of their child's former school to prepare youth for work and self-sufficiency (see Table 3 - p. 16). Similar responses were obtained in the area of preparation for college where only 40% of the students felt good about their former school's ability to provide them with the academic skills to consider going to college. Again this low student response rate should be compared to the 29% reported by parents for the same question.

Overall, youth do not give their former school high marks in providing them with a quality and useful education. They did not appear to have much faith that they were being given the tools that will make them independent and successful adults. This point has clear implications for the staff of Benito Juarez, who must concentrate their efforts on demonstrating to students that the Academy is willing and able to give students an education that will prepare them for the future. If this level of trust can be obtained by the Academy, students will likely respond by committing themselves to high academic achievement, graduation, and continuation of education at the post-secondary level. Establishing a record and reputation of achievement in these areas will obviously be of great value in future recruitment efforts.

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Parental Perceptions and Expectations of the Academy

The fact that parents transferred their youth from a known quantity (the traditional public school system) to an experimental school environment (the charter school) illustrates a strong desire to provide a better learning environment for their children. It was desired in this project to explore how parents felt about the Academy's performance (in comparison to their child's former school) in various areas of the educational process. The number of parents who responded by completing the survey was sufficient to permit a realistic discussion of parental attitudes and expectations and should allow the Academy adequate information for many of the current and future educational functions.

An initial finding was that parents expressed strong expectations for their child to achieve academically in the Academy - in contrast to a scenario in which parents care little about their child's school performance. A full 86% of parents had strong expectations that the Academy would provide a quality education. Furthermore, 62% of parents indicated positive feelings that their child would graduate from high school - which is important in that parents had expressed that their second greatest fear for their youth in their former school (after "being suspended from school") was that their child would drop out of school and not graduate. Benito Juarez has won the initial trust of parents in this respect, but this carries with it the duty to live up to parents' high expectations for the Academy and its ability to succeed where their former school was unable to do so.

Good communication between parents and the school is critical in the ability of parents to function as a support mechanism factor and a partner in the educational process. Parents were therefore asked to identify the level of communication which existed between the school and themselves. Fully 95% of parents surveyed indicted that the Academy has more contact with students than did their former school. This response takes on greater significance when considering the fact that parents identified "lack of response by teachers" as a major cause for removing their child from his/her former school. It is also worth noting that parents cited "better communication between school and parents" and "teachers paying

attention and responding to needs of students" as primary reasons for deciding to send their youth to the Academy. Furthermore, every parent surveyed stated that they wished to know from the principal and the teachers about how their child is progressing in school. These responses clearly illustrate that parents are anxious to communicate with the school staff and are interested in continuing this relationship on a regular basis. They are not, as popular opinion might have us believe, disinterested in or uncaring of their child's educational experience.

The following table illustrates the extent to which parents felt that their child's former school had carried out a particular school function, and whether this function had influenced their decision to transfer their child to the Academy.

Table 3
Parent Perception of School Functions and Student Impact

School Function	% of parents in former school agreeing	% stating that this was an influence on transfer decision
Treat all students fairly	29%	67%
Did a good job in preparing students for college	29%	71%
Did a good job preparing students for job opportunities	26%	62%
Books and materials had an adequate focus on minorities (Latinos, Blacks, etc.)	52%	86%
Teachers in former school are willing to help all students learn.	43%	86%

From Table 3, it is evident that parents expect schools to treat their child with respect and fairness. Survey questions show that 71% of parents were "unsure" or "disagreed" that the regular public schools in their area had treated their child fairly. A similar level of dissatisfaction appears when only 43% of parents indicated that "the teachers in their child's former school had been willing to help all students learn." These two responses take on greater significance when we note that 67% of parents felt that the fairness issue had influenced transfer decisions, and that 86% felt that the "willingness to help all students learn" issue had been an influence.

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In the area of college expectations for their children, only 29% express faith in the former school's ability to prepare students for post high school education. Since transferring to Benito Juarez 38% of the parents now expect that their child will go on to college. While these low figures in both instances do not indicate that most parents feel that their child will achieve a college education, the modest increase recorded since transferring to Benito Juarez does show that the Academy offers a somewhat better vision for a college education. Even though these figures may be similar to (or even higher than) that of parents in general in Saginaw, it does illustrate that parents are (justifiably) more concerned with high school graduation than with college at this point. If sustained academic success can be achieved in the Academy, there may be an increase in the percentage of parents hoping for a college experience for their youth.

Preparation of youth for the world of work has always been and remains one of the principal functions of the educational system. However, when we look at how parents in this survey felt about the ability of their child's former school to prepare them for work, a less-than-glowing picture emerges. Seventy-four percent of parents were not satisfied with the level of preparation which their child's former school had provided, and 62% cited this as a reason for transferring to the Academy. For comparative purposes, as has already been mentioned, students expressed a similar degree of limited support for the former school's ability to carry out this function. It is clear that parents expect the Academy to address this issue in the curriculum, perhaps suggesting that information on career identification and training should be incorporated as a part of the Academy's schooling experience.

Positive self-esteem has been shown in educational research to have a strong influence on student academic success and social life within the school setting. Most parents are aware of this and are rightly interested and concerned with how their youth feel about themselves. Sensitive to this issue, many schools have begun to evaluate the level of "culture" existing in the school which may enhance the self-esteem of minority children - perhaps in the form of a multicultural and/or minority-inclusive curriculum. This survey found parents somewhat undecided as to whether their child's former school had done a good job of

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providing educational materials with information about minorities. However, parents (by a 86% majority) did indicate that the presence of a multicultural curriculum was one of the principal factors which had encouraged them to transfer their child to the Academy. In itself, this finding (at least from the a parental perspective) may point out that the culture of the child is an important component of the school curriculum and should be given continued attention in the development of the future curriculum at Benito Juarez.

Overall, parents provided a good deal of insight into their reasons for transferring their child from his/her former school to the Benito Juarez Academy, and the kind of education they specifically expect that the Academy will provide. A summary of these reasons appears in Table 4 which follows.

Table 4
Influences Upon Transfer Decisions to Benito Juarez Academy

Most Important Reasons for Parents Removing Child from Former School

1. Safety Concerns
2. Disciplinary/suspension problems
3. Teachers didn't respond to concerns of students and parents

Most Important Reasons for Parents Deciding to Send Students to Academy

1. Teachers pay attention and respond to needs of students
2. Smaller class size
3. Better communication between school and parents

To some extent, parents provided responses which were contradictory in the table above. Nevertheless, safety, class size, and disciplinary/suspension problems emerged as areas of importance to parents, and parents also indicate a desire for a school environment with staff who respond to their own and their child's concerns and are able to provide improved communication between parents and the school. To reiterate, the top three concerns shown in each category above clearly illustrate that among the foremost concerns of

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parents is that they (as do their children) expect the Academy to pay attention to their concerns and to maintain better communication with them.

The information presented in the tables and narrative above indicates, in summary, that parents are very concerned with the type of preparation which the school provides for students and also with the manner in which the students are treated. Parents further except the Academy to utilize a curriculum which includes information about minority groups in order to enhance their self-esteem. Despite their children's' past difficulties in school, parents clearly have a great deal of interest in the quality of education that the Academy provides. This information should be valuable to Academy staff and administration if it wishes to retain its current student population and provide them with the kind of educational experience which they and their parents expect. If the Academy is perceived as not responding to these concerns about the school's curriculum and environment, parents are likely to search out and select other systems which they feel meet these needs. Clearly, the Academy would do well to keep these points in mind as it develops and implements its curriculum and overall strategy for attracting and maintaining its student and parent base.

The Academy and the Community

Throughout most of their history, public schools have enjoyed strong support from the communities in which they are located. This long term relationship has resulted in a good formalized position and standing in the community when compared with the newly emerging charter schools. However we know that when a community perceives an unfilled social and educational need and if an opportunity presents itself a community will search out for a new institution to satisfy this need. If successful the new institution will become a viable part of a community's structure. To assess the level of community support for the academy the survey sought to measure the level of social standing of the Academy in relation to the public schools in the area.

When both parents and youth were asked if they consider the traditional public schools in their area as an important and vital part of the community, 71% of the parents and 82% of the youth responded

positively. An even higher majority of parents (91%) and youth (93%), however, indicated that the Academy is also a part of the community. This may indicate that, at least for those affiliated with it, the Academy is no longer perceived as an experimental structure, but now holds a legitimate and credible place in their community. Maintaining such a high level of acceptance will undoubtedly help in future recruitment of new students and perhaps financial resources. As parents with youth experiencing problems similar to those already in the Academy seek alternative sources of education to help their youth succeed, they may well look to the Benito Juarez Academy as the answer. The fact that 81% of parents and 89% of students indicated that they would recommend the Academy to other parents and youth is a sign that this school has made substantial progress in gaining acceptance within the community.

The Future of the Academy

There seems little doubt that the Academy has met a perceived need of a specific student population in the community of Saginaw. A clear majority of youth feel that the Academy has improved their expectation level to remain in school and graduate. Parents likewise have expressed positive feelings about the ability of the Academy to help their youth learn and succeed by being more responsive to their concerns and having more contact with students than exists in the area public schools.

Information contained in this report paints a cautiously optimistic picture of the Academy's ability to reverse the legacy of educational failure experienced by many of its students in the traditional public school system. This is not to say that the traditional public schools bear sole responsibility for the negative educational outcomes of this group of students, for the existing system has been burdened with problems largely beyond its ability to control and remedy (funding shortages, social and economic inequality, etc.) The point, rather, is that the Benito Juarez Academy appears to have a significant role to play due to its potential for meeting the needs of a group of youth with many diverse learning styles and social needs. If this model proves successful in educating youth at risk who have not been academically or socially

successful in traditional school systems, the Academy has great potential for other youth with similar academic and social backgrounds.

Perhaps the most serious question regarding the Academy is its financial survival. Currently, the only source of funding it receives is per-pupil state aid. Local school districts have had the advantage of utilizing local millages for capital improvement (buildings, computers, etc.), while charter schools have had to rely on donations, contributions and small grants beyond what the state provides in state aid. charter schools in more affluent communities are similar to districts with high property values, as both have a significant advantage over poorer districts and charter schools (such as Benito Juarez) which serve a less affluent population. To maintain its academic quality, the Academy will ultimately have to secure other forms of funding to finance sound structures and programming for the education of its youth.

Conclusion

This report, which has been based on surveys of parents and students about their experiences in and attitudes toward their former school and the Benito Juarez Academy, concludes that the Academy offers a positive and perhaps last opportunity for reaching out to a high-risk group of youth in an effort to reverse a history of negative educational outcomes. Important insights were offered into how and where parents and students feel that their former school has been less than successful, and where they expect the Academy to concentrate its efforts in the future. In general, parents and students appear pleased with the Academy's performance and promise for the future, and place high trust in its ability to provide a quality education. Both students and parents expect the Academy to provide an education that will ultimately result in a high school diploma and preparation for the world of work or college, which were unfulfilled expectations in their former school. Hopefully, the observations included in this report will be of use to the administration and teachers of the Benito Juarez Academy as they seek to provide a positive educational experience for youth who had not had such positive outcomes in a traditional public school setting.

A final recommendation from the researchers of this report is that the Academy should conduct further surveys of its parent constituency to explore in more detail the type of education they expect from the Academy. In conjunction, the Academy should regularly inform parents of the successes and achievements of the Academy and its students. Keeping parents informed on the status of their child who attends the Academy will go a long way toward fostering a positive educational partnership between the Academy and its student and parent constituencies.

The researchers for this report wish to thank the staff, particularly the director for permitting us to conduct the research and for assistance in the collection of data. In particular we wish to thank the parents and students for their willingness to complete the questionnaires. We hope that the report will assist the academy in continuing to provide a quality education for the youth enrolled.

Summary of Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Recruitment efforts appeared to be most effective through local news media, in addition to relying on "word of mouth" by students and parents .

2. Benito Juarez must avoid creating - or being perceived to have - an overly large and unresponsive bureaucratic structure. The school's staff and board of directors must work hard at showing the parents that their concerns will be given proper attention.

3. The Academy should closely monitor attendance patterns as one of the most basic - and necessary - indicators of the interest and performance of its students. These patterns should be compared, if possible, to students' attendance in their former schools as one benchmark for judging the Academy's success.

4. Funding permitting, the Academy may wish to consider providing, in the future, extracurricular activities as a way to balance out the educational experiences of students and to provide a "carrot" to keep students in school who may otherwise see little reason for doing so.

5. "Responsiveness of teachers to the needs of students" consistently emerged as the top reason given by parents for their dissatisfaction with their child's former school. This clearly illustrates an area in which Benito Juarez will have to devote a great deal of attention in meeting the needs of its student population - perhaps through written correspondence with parents, telephone contacts, or social events.

6. Surveys indicated that parents expect the Academy to address the issue of career identification and training for children. This suggests that these areas should be incorporated as a part of the Academy's schooling experience

7. A culturally sensitive curriculum was indicated by parents as being an important component of the Academy's mission, and should be given continued attention as the future curriculum at Benito Juarez is developed.

8. To maintain its quality and ensure its long-term existence, the Academy must seek to secure other forms of funding in order to finance capital facilities (buildings, computers, etc.) and programming for the education of its youth. Time permitting, school staff and/or board of directors may wish to create and continually update a "funding database" which includes governmental (Federal Register, etc.) as well as private sources (foundations).

9. It is recommended that the Academy conduct further surveys of its parent constituency to explore in more detail the type of education they expect to receive from the Academy. In conjunction, the Academy should regularly inform parents of the successes and achievements of the Academy and its students. Keeping parents informed will go a long way toward fostering a positive educational partnership between the Academy and its student and parent constituencies.